P.C. LETTER

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CD-ROM PRODUCTS

THE WHOLE EARTH CATALOG GOES ELECTRONIC

THE ELECTRONIC CATALOG'S INTERFACE DESIGN IS THE BEST I'VE SEEN ON A HYPER-CARD-BASED PRODUCT.

On the imminent occasion of the fourth Microsoft CD-ROM Conference (relocated from beautiful downtown Seattle to beautiful downtown Anaheim), it is appropriate that Broderbund Software has just released "The Electronic Whole Earth Catalog", a CD-ROM version of Stewart Brand's venerable counter-culture catalog, which uses Hypercard as the viewer and retrieval program.

The Electronic Catalog is an excellent implementation of a multimedia information product using the best of existing technology (CD-ROM player plus a computer with built-in user interface, sound and graphics, alas with no color since Hypercard doesn't allow that). The Electronic Catalog's interface design is the best I've seen on a Hypercard-based product of any kind. All of the buttons that do the same thing all look the same and are all located in the same place on each card, which means that the user can quickly assimilate the basic conventions of getting around, doesn't have to move the mouse constantly to get around, and can focus on his search for information, and the Catalog itself doesn't have to dedicate portions of each to instructions for using it. (Could you imagine a print catalog that dedicates a portion of each page to phrases like "turn the corner of this page to set a bookmark" or "push this button to get to page 101"?) The overall structure of the information is well planned and executed (in a sort of three-dimensional cone, where each level has more stations than the one above, but the user can also slide around the sides of the cone as easily as up or down). Every apparent connection between one piece of information and another has been made, so that the user never gets lost. And, in general the structure doesn't impose itself on the user so that the content can take its rightful place as the star of the product.

Since the content of the Electronic Catalog is inherently interesting (a good selection of products and things from the print Catalog, with a focus on computer-oriented stuff and on sound and music), there's lots of interesting stuff to look at (diagrams, scanned pictures, etc.), read (excerpts from book reviews, the editors' comments about products, etc.), and listen to (samples from records, sounds of instruments, recorded comments). Indeed, this is one of the first mass-market CD-ROMs I've seen where the data (414 megabytes worth) actually comes close to filling the disk. Fundamentally, using the Electronic Catalog is a positive experience, something that cannot be said for the majority of either PC or Macintosh CD-ROM products that have been introduced to date. (Even Mediagenic's CD-ROM version of The Manhole, another Hypercard-based product I've raved about before, is disappointing compared to its hard-disk version, since the audio connected to action buttons takes so long to load that the associated animation is usually finished by the time you hear the relevant sound or music.)

The Electronic Catalog is also important because it is the first print product redesigned from the ground up as a CD-ROM product with sound and graphics. The

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WE NEED TO SEE BUILT-IN CD-ROM DRIVES ALONG WITH THE APPROPRIATE GRAPHICS AND SOUND CAPABILITIES.

Manhole was first implemented as a hard-disk product, but wasn't really redesigned for CD-ROM (it simply had a lot of digital audio added). Xiphias's Timetable of History: Science & Innovation was really designed as a prototype and experiment and not as a serious product for sale. The PC-based CD-ROM products — Microsoft's Bookshelf, Programmer's Library, and statistical products, Ziff-Davis's Computer Library, Lotus's One Source series, Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia — are all heavily text-and-number oriented and don't use any sound or graphics to help the user out. As a result, they depend almost exclusively on the value of the data itself to attract users, instead of the combination of data and the experience of using the product. That works fine in the case of the Lotus products, or even the Computer Library or Programmers Library, where the presumption is that the buyers will be professionals willing to pay serious money for access to the data, but it doesn't work so well in the case of the Grolier and other Microsoft products, where the assumption is that the users will be casual and productivity-oriented.

Clearly, in order for CD-ROM to become a mainstream technology, it has to be integrated as standard equipment into the kind of consistent, integrated platform that the Macintosh represents. That way developers would have an acceptable lowest common denominator to develop for and users wouldn't have to make a separate and inevitably more expensive decision to purchase the drive separately or upgrade the sound or graphics on an add-in board. Since the Apple CD-ROM is an option, the Macintosh has still not ended up as an inherently more rewarding environment for developing multimedia CD-ROMs than the PC. Both platforms have ended up with about the same number of mainstream-oriented disks on the market, but sales of all disks on both platforms have been fundamentally disappointing (with the sole exception of the Lotus One Source line, where the fact that the data is contained on CD is incidental to the customer). At the Microsoft conference later this month, what I hope to see at the least, is some evidence that computer manufacturers are not only willing to build CD-ROM drives into their machines as standard equipment, but that they are also willing to extend the architecture of the same machines to include the appropriate graphics and sound capabilities: say Sony's ADPCM sound chip from the CDI specification and the 256-color, 320x200 mode of the MCGA/VGA video controllers. (See "Industry Politics: CD-ROM: A Clear Picture Emerges" and "Open Letter: Dear IBM: How To Get Back Into The Home Market", Issue 4.20, 12-8-88.) What I hope to see, in other words, is a willingness to build a machine that would run The Electronic Whole Earth Catalog without any add-ons or options at all.

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